Jonestown Legacy: Death Squad Feared Still Stalking in U.S.

Congressional investigators said yesterday they cannot rule out the possibility that a People Temple death squad is stalking the nation's leaders, seeking to carry out the last wishes of the Rev. Jim Jones.

The investigators, reporting to the House Foreign Affairs Committee after a six-month probe into the murder of Rep. Leo J. Ryan in Guyana, said the possibility that cultists had a "death list" marking national leaders for assassination "should not be totally discounted."

Staff investigator George Berdes and two other investigators told the committee that Peoples Temple members developed a hit list of nearly 40 people immediately after the deaths of cultists in Guyana during a mass suicide-murder rite.

The investigators refused to give details of their evidence. Asked flatly if a death squad exists, Berdes replied: "Because of the delicate nature, the chemistry of the people involved, I don't want to turn the answer to that question into a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Underscoring their concern, the investigators delivered their report under heavy security. Police guarded each door, and those entering the room passed through metal detectors.

Ryan, three journalists and a cult defector were shot to death at an airstrip near the Peoples Temple settlement in Guyana last Nov. 18 while attempting to investigate reports that Jones, the cult leader, was holding people against their will. While Ryan and his party were under attack, Jones led more than 900 cult members in a ritual murder-suicide by cyanide poisoning.

The investigators told the committee there is circumstantial evidence that Jones made advance plans with his lieutenants to assassinate Ryan if the congressman could not be deluded on true conditions at the settlement. Their report said there also are unconfirmed reports that a large shipment of cyanide used in the mass murder arrived in Jonestown two days before Ryan's visit.

The House investigators agreed with State Department findings that the department had failed to pursue earlier warnings of possible mass suicide at the cult. As a result, the report said, the State Department told Ryan that danger was "unlikely," though it had four reports of potential violence scattered in files.

Ryan was advised more than once by his own staff of "gut feelings" that there might be violence, the report said, but the congressman discounted them.

One of the State Department's worst errors, the House report said, was to take no action on the written warning of cult defector Deborah Layton Blakey in May 1978 that mass suicides were being rehearsed. Blakey's warning was one reason U.S. Ambassador John Burke cabled the State Department for authority to ask Guyana to watch the cult more closely.

But Burke's request was so cautiously worded—apparently out of fear it would fall into the cultists hands—that the department tersely rejected it, saying the overture "could be construed by some as U.S. government interference."

In his testimony, Berdes called the murders "a horribly tragic lesson" for the State Department. "The smoke was overwhelming; the fire was there," he said. "But they constantly turned away from it and hoped it would go away. But it didn't."

The investigators discounted allegations that a former U.S. consul, Richard McCoy, had a sexual liaison with a woman cult member and was therefore compromised. But the investigators said "there are repeated charges of a sexual liaison between Peoples Temple member Paula Adams and Laurence Mann, Guyana's ambassador to the United States."

The report said the cult could not have operated without some cooperation from Guyanese officials, and there is evidence that some officials supported the cult because they liked its socialist philosophy.